E L D E R

PAISIOS

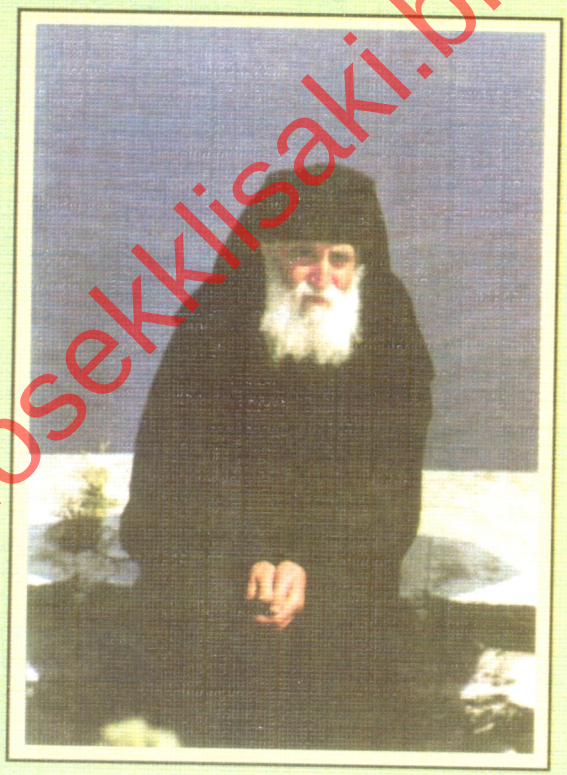
1924 - 1994

SIMPLIFY YOUR LIFE TO AVOID ANXIETY

ΑΠΛΟΠΟΙΗΣΤΕ ΤΗ ΖΩΗ ΣΑΣ ΓΙΑ ΝΑ ΦΥΓΕΙ ΤΟ ΑΓΧΟΣ

THE MANY WORRIES WILL DISTANCE US FROM GOD

Η ΠΟΛΛΗ ΜΕΡΙΜΝΑ ΑΠΟΜΑΚΡΥΝΕΙ ΑΠΟ ΤΟΝ ΘΕΟ



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ΒΙΟΓΡΑΦΙΚΟ ΣΗΜΕΙΩΜΑ

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The Blessed Elder Paisios, whose name in the world was Arsenios Eznepides, was born in *Pharasa* of Cappadocia on 25 July 1924. Shortly before his family left for Greece with the exchange of populations in 1924, the Elder was baptized by Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian, who gave him his own name and foretold that "he was leaving a monk in his place." Upon arriving in Greece, his family settled in Konitsa of Epeirus where the Elder spent his childhood and young adult years.

From the time that he was a child, he lived an ascetic life, and was nourished by the lives of the Saints, whose feats he sought to imitate with great zeal and admirable precision. He practised unceasing prayer, cultivating all along the virtues of humility and love. He learned the trade of carpentry, wanting even in this aspect of his life, to imitate Christ. He fulfilled his military duty during the Guerilla War in Greece (1945-1949), serving for three and a half years in the Army as a wireless radio operator, and living ascetically even during this troubled time. During this time, he was distinguished for his valour, his ethos of self-sacrifice, moral integrity and many other virtues. Having fulfilled his duty to his country, he entered the

monastic life, which he had desired from his youth. Even as a layman, he had divine experiences, but the favour of the Lord, the *Theotokos* and the Saints intensified during his monastic life. He led an ascetic life on Mount Athos, in the Holy Monastery of Stomion in Konitsa, and on Mount Sinai in Egypt. He lived in obscurity, giving himself completely to God, and God in turn revealed him and gave him to the whole world. He guided, consoled, healed and granted peace to the multitudes of people who sought him. His sanctified soul overflowed with divine love and his saintly face radiated the divine Grace. All day long, he tirelessly gathered the human pain and imparted divine consolation.

He is the founder of the Holy Monastery of Saint John the Theologian in Souroti of Thessaloniki, Greece, which he also guided spiritually for twenty-eight years (1967-1994). It was to this Holy Monastery that he also entrusted and treasured the Holy Relics of his Godfather, Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian, to whose memory a temple of Byzantine design was later erected

After suffering excruciating pains, which, as he used to say, benefited him more than the ascetic struggles of his entire life, he fell asleep in the Lord on 12 July 1994, in the Holy Monastery of Saint John the Theologian in Souroti, Thessaloniki. He was buried next to the Church of Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian.

May we have his blessing, Amen.

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ΠΡΟΛΟΓΟΣ

PREFACE

When the Blessed Elder Paisios fell asleep in the Lord on 12 July 1994, he left behind a spiritual legacy: his teachings. Ever a simple monk, with only an elementary school education, but rich in the wisdom of God, the Elder emptied himself for the sake of others. His teaching was neither instruction, nor catechism. He lived the Gospel, and everything he taught flowed naturally from his way of life, whose main characteristic was love. He had formed himself according to the Gospel and, for this reason, it was his countenance that taught first and then his evangelical love and enlightened word. When he received people of all backgrounds, he did not simply listen patiently to the problems they confided in him, but with his holy simplicity and discernment, he would enter deeply into their heart and make their pain, anxiety and trouble his own. And, then, gradually, the miracle would take place: the transformation of the person. He used to say, "God performs a miracle when we wholeheartedly participate in the pain of our fellow human beings."

We saw with great joy the interest generated by the first books that circulated on the life and teachings of the Elder Paisios. Many spoke with admiration about the

answers they found to their questions, the solutions to their problems and the consolation to their grief. Our joy was even greater when people who had distanced themselves from the Mother Church became rightly concerned and changed their way of life. We often thought of the words of the hymnographer referring to Saint Basil the Great: *He lives, though he lies asleep in the Lord; he lives even among us, as one who speaks through his writings*. At the same time, we felt a compelling need to offer the very beneficial words of Elder Paisios – which we were recording with reverence from the very first steps of our Sisterhood, because they were so helpful to us – to our brothers and sisters in Christ who were so persistently asking for them.

The Good God provided that our *Hesychasterion*[1] owe its very existence to Elder Paisios. It was he who received the Episcopal approval of His Eminence, Synesios, the Metropolitan of Kassandreia, to establish our Monastery and who sought to find the appropriate location. And he did this because his noble and sensitive heart felt great gratitude to us for having taken care of him when we first met him, in 1966, during a hospital stay for a lung operation. From that time on, he felt that he was our big brother and had the obligation to "provide for his sisters," as he used to say, by establishing the Monastery. The first Sisters were settled at the Monastery in October of 1967. Elder Paisios spent two months in the *Hesychasterion* to help in the organization of the coenobitic life. After that, he would come out of Mount Athos, usually twice a year, to help the Sisterhood in their monastic way of life and he would assist each Sister individually in her spiritual struggle, with his God inspired advice and his personal experience. From the Holy Mountain, the "spiritual America", as he used to call it, he continued to help them through prayer and the letters he would send to each Sister individually or to the entire Sisterhood.

1. *Hesychasterion* (pl. *Hesychasteria)* in Greece and outside Mount Athos is a Coenobitic Monastery in which the local Bishop has the right to intervene in spiritual matters alone, but not in administrative matters.

In 1967, when Elder Paisios started establishing the foundations of coenobitic life in the *Hesychasterion*, from the simplest practical things to the most spiritual, he was forty-three years old. He had already attained the mature manhood *to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ* (Eph 4:13) and he had the wisdom of an Elder. From the first days of coenobitic life, we discovered that his words were *the words of eternal life* (Jn 6:68) and that much of what he said should be taken as an axiom for our daily life. For this reason, we felt compelled to write down his words so that they would not to be forgotten and could serve as a secure rule for monastic life.

After we filled the first notebooks, we submitted them with considerable hesitation to his judgment. We hesitated because the Elder always emphasized the practical application; he did not want us just to gather material, "ammunitions", without putting his words into action. He always asked that we cultivate spiritually whatever we heard or read. Otherwise, he used to explain to us, there would be no benefit from all writings and notes just as there is no benefit to a state when it has a lot of armaments but lacks a trained army that will put them in use. Relenting to our persistent pleas, he agreed to see our notes and

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to complete or correct any points that we had not understood correctly.

The recording of his spiritual counsels continued all along the twenty-eight years that the Elder was overseeing and guiding the *Hesychasterion*. All meetings of the Elder with the entire Sisterhood or the Monastery Council and the Abbess were recorded – initially by notes taken down by the Sisters and later by tape recorder. Also recorded were conversations between the Elder and each Sister separately, who wrote down his words immediately after her conversation with him was over. When Elder Paisios realized what we were doing, he was rather irritated: "Why are you taking this down?" he asked. "Are you saving it for an emergency? You should put it into practice; apply it. Who knows what you are saying in these notes! Let me see." When we showed him a sample, the notes of one Sister, his expression changed; he was comforted and reassured, and with satisfaction exclaimed, "My goodness! She is like a tape recorder! She wrote it exactly as I said it!"

Our conversations with Elder Paisios were usually in the form of answers to our questions. In his private conversations with the Sisters, the questions mainly concerned their personal struggle. In meetings with the Monastery Council, which were scheduled in advance, subjects were raised that concerned us during his absence. These were put in the form of questions to be discussed when he came to visit. These questions covered all kinds of subjects: administrative, practical, spiritual, social, ecclesiastical, national and so forth. Finally, in meetings of the entire Sisterhood, besides the questions raised by the Sisters, the Elder discussed various other topics,

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which simply came up on the spot, in the course of the conversation. The Elder would use every word and image he could for the spiritual benefit of the soul. The sound of an aeroplane flying over the Monastery, the noise of a machine, the chirping of a bird, the opening of a door or a simple phrase could set him talking for a long time about a serious matter. "I put everything to use," he used to say, "in order to reach Heaven. If we approach and work on all things spiritually, do you know how much spiritual profit can be made and what spiritual experience can be acquired?"

In his contacts with people, Father Paisios sought to prepare them for the Kingdom of Heaven by helping them to know the will of God and come closer to Him. Thus, he put to practice one of his favourite sayings that "the Good God looks after us first for our next life and then for this life." When he mentioned something about nature, science, art or everyday life, he was not interested in these subjects themselves, but used them as parables in order to awaken souls, and to help them grasp the deeper meaning of life and "cling" to God.

Because his manner of speech was simple, spontaneous and full of natural humour, he could tell the greatest truths in a plain and joyful manner. "I am making sunshine," he used to say; he meant that just like the sun is necessary for the flowers to bloom, a gentle pastoral approach enables the opening and healing of the soul. This was his enlightened pastoral care, which often prepared the soil of the soul to receive the austerity of his words about the unyielding and steadfast evangelical truth. In this way, even his most demanding word fell

upon the human heart as a beneficial dew, cultivating it and bringing forth spiritual fruit.

After Elder Paisios fell asleep, the material that was collected during these twenty-eight years, together with the letters that he had sent to the *Hesychasterion* from the Holy Mountain, was classified according to subject so as to be used everyday in the life of the *Coenobium*. Events relating to his life were also recorded, including those of a divine nature, to which he referred not for bragging but for spiritual charity. "I am not telling you this," he used to say, "so that you can give me ribbons, and bravos. When I tell a war story from the time of my military service, or anything else, even a humorous example, I do so to make a point, so that you can grasp its deeper meaning. I don't like talking about useless things." In this manner he made himself a "spiritual blood donor". He wanted to fortify our anaemic faith, trigger our *philotimo*[2] and, being the noble man of God that he was, to cultivate the same nobility in us so that we can become by grace akin to God. "More and more I am emptying myself," he used to say, "and what is the result? In order to help you, I am forced to speak about myself; this is such a waste, a spiritual waste! Does it at least help you? I want you to know that every time I have to mention an incident from my life, how, for instance, the Providence of God has helped me on a certain occasion, something is being lost; I feel emptier. Does it at least bear fruit for you?"

2. *Philotimo*, according to Elder Paisios, is the reverent distillation of goodness, the love shown by humble people, from which every trace of self has been filtered out. Their hearts are full of gratitude towards God and their fellow men, and out of spiritual sensitivity and a sense of honour they try to repay the slightest good which others do for them.

Taking into account the difficult years that we are living through, we decided to publish all this material in a series of volumes starting with those topics that would be of general interest. Although many of these topics are part of everyday life, they must still be faced according to the Gospel; otherwise, the consequences for this life but also for our future, eternal life will be sorrowful or worse yet, devastating.

In making this decision, we were encouraged by an idea that Elder Paisios had entertained for years. He wanted to write "a book that would reach everybody, laity, monks and clergy." The idea had never materialized, since he gave all of his time to the many hurting souls who came every day to his *Kalyvi*. He gave himself completely to them, despite his limited and diminishing physical strength. "My news," he wrote in one of his letters "is many tired and suffering people. The people and their problems are ever increasing. Please pray that my physical strength not decrease. I need to provide a bit for myself, because I must be always ready to help, whether I can or not."

As already mentioned, the Elder usually responded to a variety of questions. For this reason, when faced with the task of integrating the various topics that he had addressed on different occasions, we decided to keep the dialogue form. Included in these dialogues, are excerpts from letters he had sent to the Monastery, extracts of books that he had written, as well as any additional material from his correspondence with other brothers and sisters in Christ, who entrusted us with their letters and with notes they had kept in their conversations with the Elder.

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The aim was to give each topic the fullest possible coverage. Every effort was also made to preserve, as much as possible, the immediacy and the grace of his spoken words. Some repetitive remarks that stressed the deeper meaning of his word and pierced many hearts were retained, as well as many exclamations, which were a natural part of his story telling, coming from a heart that was pulsating with great love for God and humankind.

References to monastic life are frequent, not only because Father Paisios was addressing nuns, but also because he wanted lay people to seek "the joy of Monasticism" that springs from total surrender to God. He believed that in this way they might be saved from the insecurity caused by a total dependence on the self. He wanted them to enjoy Heaven in this life.

With Pain and Love for Contemporary Man is the first volume of the series *Spiritual Counsels* of the Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. In order to make its content more useful to the reader, it was divided into four thematic parts. Each part is subdivided into chapters and every chapter into sections with the appropriate subheadings. Footnotes that explain terms from the spiritual and monastic life will be more than familiar to those brothers and sisters in Christ who are well acquainted with patristic texts. They have been added in order to assist readers who lack this background.

As Elder Paisios made frequent use of examples from science, art and other fields, as noted above, we ran the risk of not rendering correctly some of his verbal terminology or expressions. For this reason, before publication, we

invited the review of certain sections and chapters from brothers and sisters in Christ who specialise in the relevant areas. We wish to thank them for examining this material with great reverence for the Elder and for making the appropriate corrections. We would, of course, be grateful for any additional suggestions.

We pray that "the spiritual waste" offered by the Elder out of an abundance of love, will bear fruit in the simple and good willing hearts of his readers, and that they will be enriched with the wisdom of God that is *hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed to babes* (Lk 10:21).

Amen.

Sunday of All Saints, June 14, 1998

The Abbess of the Holy *Hesychasterion*
Mother Philothei
and the Sisters in Christ with me

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CHAPTER THREE

Simplify Your Life to Avoid Anxiety

Worldly Happiness Causes Worldly Anxiety

The more people distance themselves from a natural, simple life and embrace luxury, the more they suffer from anxiety. And as they distance themselves from God, they naturally cannot find rest in anything they do. This is why they go around restless; they even spin around the moon – like the belt of an engine spinning around the "crazy wheel"[1] – since earth cannot contain all their restlessness.

Worldly stress is the result of worldly happiness, of worldly pleasures and self-indulgence. Educated externally and being full of anxiety, hundreds of people (even young children) are driven to psychoanalysis and psychiatrists. New psychiatric hospitals are being built and young psychiatrists go on for post-graduate studies. Many of them do not even believe in God or accept the existence of the soul. How can these people help the human soul, when they themselves are full of anxiety? How

1. In the old metal shops a "crazy wheel" was one not used for any other purpose, except to feed the belt of the wheel when they wanted to deactivate the wheel.

can one feel truly comforted, if he does not believe in God and in the true and eternal life after death? When man grasps the deeper meaning of this true life, stress goes away, divine consolation comes and he is healed. If someone went to psychiatric hospitals and read the Abba Isaac to the patients, those who believe in God would get well, because they would come to understand the deeper meaning of life.

People try to calm themselves with tranquillizers or with the theories of yoga, and they neglect altogether the true serenity that comes when the soul is humble and God fills it with divine consolation. And imagine how all those tourists must suffer who come from other countries to Greece, and walk the streets in the hot summer sun, in the dusty and noisy streets! What great pressure they must feel inside, how stressed they must be if they need all this heat and noise to find comfort! It's like their own selves are driving them away, and all they can see in this trouble is rest!

When we see a person who has everything be stressed, anxious and sad, we must know that God is missing from his life. In the end, even wealth will make people suffer, because the material goods cannot really satisfy them. Theirs is a double affliction. I know wealthy people who have everything and are miserable. They do not even have children but they are still miserable. They are too lazy to lie down or take a walk. "Fine," I told someone, "since you have some free time, do something spiritual; read one of the Hours of prayer, read a passage from the Gospel." "I cannot," he said. "Then," I told him, "try doing something good; go to a hospital to visit some sick person." "Why should I go all the way there," he says,

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"what will become of it?" "Go help some poor person in your neighbourhood." "No," he says, "that does not please me either." Can you believe that this person is miserable despite the fact that he has everything: free time, numerous houses and so on? Do you know how many people like this are in society? And these people suffer to the point that they lose their mind. What a dreadful thing! And if they happen to be independently wealthy and do not work, then they are the most miserable of all. If they at least had a job they would feel somewhat better.

Rushing Back and Forth Makes Modern Life Hell

People are always in a hurry, rushing from one place to another. They have to be here, the next hour they must be there, and the hour after that they will have to be somewhere else. To remind themselves of their many obligations, they have to write them down. With all this running around, it is a good thing they still remember their names! They do not even recognize themselves! No wonder! It's so difficult to see yourself mirrored in murky waters. May God forgive me, but the world has become a huge madhouse! No one thinks of the next life anymore. All they want is more and more material goods. This is why they cannot find peace and run around constantly.

Fortunately, the other life exists. Considering what they have done to their lives, if people lived eternally in this life, there would be no greater hell. With the stress they have, if they lasted eight or nine hundred years like people did in Noah's time, their lives would be hell. In Noah's time they lived simple and long lives and that's how Tradition was preserved. What is happening now is

what we read in the Psalm: *The years of our life are threescore and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.*[2] Seventy years is barely enough time for people to provide for their children.

One day an American doctor stopped by my *Kalyvi* and was telling me about life over there, and how people have turned into machines. All they do is work. Each member of the family must have their own car. At home, to accommodate everybody, there must be four television sets. And they continue to work and to wear themselves out in pursuit of money, so that one day they can say that they are comfortable and happy. But what do all these things have to do with happiness? Such a life, filled with stress and anxiety, is not a life but hell. What's the use of a life full of anxiety? If we all had to live this way, I would not want this life. If God were to say to these people, "I will not punish you for the life you lead, but I will let you live this way forever," this, for me, would be pure hell.

For this reason so many people cannot stand life under these conditions and go away to the countryside, not quite knowing where they are heading and why. They form groups in nature and take part in exercises or other programs. They told me about some people who ran away and climbed a 6,000-meter high mountain. They would hold their breath, then exhale and then inhale again more deeply... They are not getting anywhere this way. This only serves to show that their heart is overwhelmed by stress and is looking for a way out. I said to one of them, "You are just digging a pit, making it larger and larger

2. Ps 90:10.

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and admiring its depth … and then you fall in and down you go. We monastics are also digging, but in our pit we find precious metals. Our exercise (*ascesis*) has meaning because it has a higher purpose."

Anxiety Is the Work of the Devil

– Geronda, lay people who live a spiritual life say that when they return home at night all tired, they have difficulty saying the *Apodeipno*[3] and this upsets them.

– When they return late at night from work and feel tired, they should never pressure themselves into anxiety, but should always say to themselves with *philotimo*, "If you can not read the entire *Apodeipno*, read one half or one third of it." And next time, they should try not to get too tired during the day. They should struggle, as much as they can with *philotimo*, entrusting everything to God, and God will intervene. The mind should always be close to God. This is the best kind of study.

– Geronda, what does excessive spiritual *ascesis* look like in the eyes of God?

– If it happens with *philotimo*, man rejoices and God rejoices too for his *philotimo* child. If the heart is bursting with love, it drips honey. But if the heart is bursting with selfishness, it suffers. Someone who had been trying with egoism and was stressed with anxiety said, "Oh, Christ, how narrow have you made the gate, I don't fit through!" But if he were trying humbly, he would have no problem fitting. Those who try fasting, vigils and so on, but do so

3. This is a Church service that follows the evening meal. In Greek, it means "After the Supper".

without getting rid of their egoism, end up making all this effort without spiritual benefit, because they are punching the air rather than demons. Instead of chasing away temptations, they end up becoming receptive to them and naturally they encounter a lot of difficulty in their struggle and feel oppressed by anxiety. But those who strive greatly, with humility and great trust in God, rejoice in their heart and their soul soars.

We need to be careful in our spiritual life. When spiritual people are affected by vainglory, they feel very little satisfaction, and they are left with a sense of emptiness in their heart. There is no fulfilment, no rejoicing of the heart, and as their vanity increases, the emptiness inside makes them suffer even more. Where there is anxiety and despair, there is a demonic spiritual life. You should not feel anxiety over anything at all. Anxiety comes from the devil. Wherever you see anxiety, you must know that the devil has been at work. The devil will not go against the current. If there is a predisposition, he will push in that direction in order to cause us trouble and deceive us. For example, he makes a sensitive person hypersensitive. When you feel like making prostrations, the devil pushes you to make more than you can endure and if you are not very strong, you become nervous, because you go through with them, then you feel anxious and desperation sets in, mild at first but then worse… I remember when I was a novice, before I would go to bed, temptation would tell me, "Are you falling asleep? Get up! So many people are suffering and so many are in need…" I used to get up and start my prostrations. As soon as I would try to sleep again, it would start. "Others are suffering and you are sleeping? Get up!" I would get up again. I reached the

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point where I said, "I wish I would lose my legs! I would then be justified since I could not do prostrations." Once, during Great Lent, I barely made it, because I tried to push myself more than I could endure.

When, in the course of our spiritual struggle, we feel anxiety we must know that we are not moving within the realm of God. God is not a stifling tyrant. Each one of us should struggle according to his strengths and cultivate his *philotimo* so that he grows in his love for God. Pressed by *philotimo*, his struggle, all those prostrations, fasting, and so on will be nothing else than pure outbursts of his love and his path would be a path of spiritual valour.

In other words, one should not strive with an unhealthy fastidiousness, with the stifling stress brought about by the struggle with all kinds of thoughts; he should rather simplify his struggle and put all his hope in Christ rather than himself. Christ if full of love, kindness and consolation and He never stifles, but gives abundant oxygen and divine consolation. There is a difference between discrete spiritual work and unhealthy fastidiousness; fastidiousness stifles the person with the internal stress it creates and lack of discernment, so severe that one feels his head bursting with pain.

– Geronda, how can a person who naturally thinks a lot and strains his mind, deal with things so as to not get overwhelmed?

– If he moves in a simple way, he will not get tired. But when even a little egoism comes in, then he struggles to avoid making a mistake and this makes him tired. It's alright; a mistake here and there will not hurt, even if he gets reprimanded for it. This, for instance, would also apply to a judge, who constantly has to face difficult cases, and is afraid that he might give the wrong judgment and cause innocent souls to be punished. In the spiritual life, a headache is created when someone has a lot of responsibility and runs into an impasse, because he has to make decisions against some people while also making sure that no one is wronged. In other words, this happens, when the conscience is constantly being challenged. You must be careful, Sister, to live the spiritual life not with your mind but with your heart. And never do a job without putting your trust in God with great humility, because otherwise you will agonize and you will tire your mind and soul. It is lack of faith that hides behind anxiety, but pride can cause anxiety too.

Monasticism Needs Austerity

– Oh, these gray blankets have made your living room look so nice! This is exactly what it needed.

– Geronda, how can a monk figure out whether something fits in a Monastery or not?

– One should begin by asking, "Who am I and what are my obligations given by the life I lead?" The khaki uniform dignifies the army. The black habit dignifies the Monastery. It is not fitting for the army to dress in black and the Monastery in khaki. Now imagine that you wore white like the nurses; (you are both called Sisters, right?) and the nurses wore black. That would be depressing to the patients, they would become desperate and think to themselves, "It seems like we're going to die and they are not being honest with us"! It does not fit, no matter how you look at it. Something may be beautiful, but it may not fit Monasticism. Velvet is beautiful, but if I wear a velvet

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cloak it will not honour me, it will disgrace me. Do not use bright colours such as red and so on. It is not right!

– In other words, Geronda, all must be colourless, tasteless…

– Spiritual taste will follow. But someone must understand the difference. People have yet to grasp the joy of simplicity. Look at me; I wet the broom and I sweep the spider webs from the chimney in my *Kalyvi* – I only do this once a year – and the wet broom creates beautiful designs, black and white shapes, on the ceiling. If someone were to see them, they would think that I have painted it. Do you know how much I enjoy it?

I know monks who cannot really enjoy the spiritual spirit; they rejoice in the worldly spirit. They have never felt this thrill of joy, the joy that comes from simplicity. Austerity is a great help to the spiritual life. A monk should only own what he needs and what befits him. He should limit himself to what will ease his life a bit and not aspire to worldly possessions. For example, a military blanket will take care of his needs; he does not need a colourful or embroidered blanket. This is how simplicity and spiritual valour set in!

Give things to a monk and you will destroy him. It's when he rids himself of what he owns that he finds rest. Collecting things will destroy a monk. When people send me gifts, I feel so much burdened by them and I want to get rid of them. Or if I have something extra in my cell, I feel like I have a tight shirt on. If I do not find someone to give them to, I feel that I'd better throw them away. As soon as I give them away, I feel such a great relief and freedom. Once an acquaintance of mine came and told me, "Geronda, so and so gave me these things to bring

you and asked that you pray for him to get rid of his anxiety." I told him, "Take them away. I do not want his anxiety to come to me. I am too old now to be going around distributing things."[4]

All those things that lay people use to make their lives easier will enslave the monk instead of helping him. The monk must try to minimize his needs and simplify his life. Otherwise he will not be set free. There is a difference between being clean and enjoying luxury. Using the same tool for different jobs will make the monk less demanding. At Sinai Monastery, I used a can for making both tea and porridge. What do you think a person really needs in order to survive? In the old days, in the desert, they only ate dates. They did not even light a fire, they did not need wood. Nowadays, I put a handle on a milk can and I use it for making tea or coffee. It warms up nicely in the blowlamp. But if you use a pot for making coffee or tea, you need to use a lot of alcohol to warm it. Whereas if you use a can, you only need a bit of cotton and a little alcohol and the coffee is done. And I do not even use a lamp for light. I go through the night with only one candle.

In general, it helps a lot to keep things simple. You should own simple and sturdy things. What is humble and simple is appreciated even by laypeople and it will certainly help the monk. It will remind him of poverty, of pain, and of the monastic life. Once King George[5] visited the Monastery of Great Lavra on Mount Athos and the Fathers served him on a silver tray. When he saw it he

4. The Elder distributed the gifts he received from visitors to other monks who were in need.

5. King George II (1890-1947): King of Greece (1922-1924 and 1935-1947).

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said, "I was expecting something simpler from you, perhaps a wooden tray. I am tired of silver trays."

You have not yet fully grasped how sweet simplicity really is. Simplicity is refreshing. Look at what a beautiful hanger I have made out of a bobbin. Very practical! You, on the other hand, go through all this trouble! You have put these very thin nails on the wall for hanging a cassock. If a bit of plaster drops, you will have to remove it every time you take the cassock off the hook. Why not put larger hooks on the wall? You have so many walls and not a nail on them. Instead, you use wooden hangers. This requires polishing, dusting and so on. Instead of simplifying things to save time, you do the opposite. You struggle to reach perfection in material things. You should strive for perfection in spiritual things. Do not apply all your energy to making artistic things; apply it to making the soul a work of art. Day and night you should aim at the perfection of your soul. If you use your artistic talents for the benefit and cultivation of the soul, your little spiritual palace will be full of joy.

– Geronda, some people say that the Monasteries had in their possession great treasures and in this way helped preserve civilization.

– They probably mean the many priceless relics. Do you know when most of these relics were collected? They were collected after the Fall of Constantinople. Most of these treasures used to be in the palaces. Later, they were taken to Monasteries for safe keeping. Queen Maro,[6] for

6. Queen Maro (1418-1487) was the daughter of the Serbian prince Georges Brankovic (1375-1456) who was the second founder of the Holy Monastery of Saint Paul in the Holy Mountain. Maro married Sultan Murat, the father of Mohammed the Conqueror, and donated to the Monastery of Saint Paul the Holy

example, would take them piece by piece from the Sultan and move them there. Others would bequeath them to a Monastery upon their death to prevent them from being lost. It was not the Monasteries that sought these treasures, but their owners who wanted them there for safekeeping. Others would give their wealth to the Monasteries of the Holy Mountain, so that the poor would be fed and cared for, since back then there were no Homes for the Aged, Orphanages, Psychiatric hospitals, and Philanthropic Institutions. Big estates were also donated to the Monasteries so that they could have the means to provide assistance to the many lay people in need. Those were difficult times, but people back then had the vision to help the poor materially so that they could later help them spiritually. When poor people went to the Monasteries, the monks would give them as a small blessing some money and parents were in this way able to provide for the marriage of their son or daughter. Their aim, in other words, was to give help to the poor and that's why they built all those big buildings. Do you know how many people the Monasteries helped during the German Occupation? A lot! Back then, when a family was particularly hospitable and helpful to others in need, they would be called *Karakalos*, after Karakallou Monastery,[7] that was famous for its hospitality. This was the reason the Monasteries would have a great celebration, on the Feast Day of their Patron Saint, so that poor people could come, eat some fish, have a good time but also benefit spiritually.

Gifts of the Magi (Mt 2:11), many sacred relics and heirlooms. Preserved to this day, in the Saint Paul Monastery, is the original will of Queen Maro, by which she bequeathed to the Monastery all the movable valuable items she possessed.

7. This is one of the twenty Monasteries on the Holy Mountain of Athos.

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Why would anyone today go to a Monastery to eat fish, since people have everything they need?

Luxuries Will Turn Monks Into Lay People

– Geronda, how much decoration is appropriate in a Church?

– Considering the era in which we live, which is not Byzantium, the simpler the decoration is, even in a Church, the better, for simplicity always helps.

– What will be good design for the iconostasis for example?

– A monastic design, modest and simple! Saint Pachomios[8] had a column bent so that people would not admire his work. Do you recall what happened? He had constructed a Church in the Monastery with great diligence and made the columns using clay bricks. When he saw how beautiful it was, he felt great joy. But then he realized that enjoying a beautiful peace of work which one has made is not God's will; he tied the columns with ropes and after he prayed he told the brothers to pull it until they were bent.

Every year, at the *Kalyvi*, I will cut some metal sheets and cover my leaky roof and broken windows so that the wind will not come in. I use planks of wood and nylon. Now, you might say, "Why don't you put double

8. Saint Pachomios was born in Upper Themes of Egypt about 280 A.D. After completing his military service, he began his ascetic life in an abandoned pagan temple. In about 320, after a divine vision, he founded the first Monastery of the Tabennesians in Upper Thebes. In all, he founded nine Monasteries for men and two for women. He fell asleep in the Lord in 346. He is considered the founder of coenobitic life in Egypt.

windows?" I know how to do that, I am a carpenter. If I wanted, I could have made windows with three barriers but then there would be no monastic spirit left inside. The wall is in shambles. I could ask others to help me take care of the *Kalyvi*, but I can make do with the way things are. Why should I spend money on a wall when there is so much need elsewhere? This does not help me. If I have a five hundred drachma bill I prefer to buy small crosses and icons and give them to someone in need, to help him. It gives me great joy to give to others. Even if I need something, I will not spend the money on myself.

Just as a novice in the spiritual life cannot get enough of it, so too when one starts enjoying beautiful things, it is difficult to stop. Do you know what must be done now? You must stop taking care of well made buildings; do only what is absolutely necessary for your life and instead turn your attention to human misery. You should give, if you have things to give, and pray, if you do not. You must pray and only do those chores that are absolutely necessary. All these things that usually take our time are really so short-lived. Is it worth wasting our life, when so many are suffering and people are dying from starvation? The simple buildings and the humble belongings transport the monastics mentally to the caves and the austere dwellings of our Holy Fathers, and are of great spiritual benefit. Worldly belongings recall the world and turn monks into secular souls. Recently,[9] excavations in Nitria[10] unearthed the first "Cells" of the monks, their

9. This was said in 1986.

10. Nitria is located in Egypt northwest of Cairo, toward the Libyan Desert. It was the cradle of Christian asceticism.

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ascetic dwellings. When they unearthed cells built later, they realized that those were closer to secular standards than the earlier ones and when more recent structures were unearthed, they saw that they resembled the living rooms of a wealthy person of that time, all with paintings and pictures on the walls and so on. It was these well-decorated cells that brought the wrath of God. Criminals robbed and destroyed them.

Christ was born in a manger. If we find comfort in worldly things, Christ will turn His back to us, something He never did to anyone. He will say, "I had nothing; why did you need so much? Is that what is written in the Gospels? Did you see Me do as you are doing? You do not live in the world, you are monks. What should I do with you? Where should I put you?"

What is beautiful and well-made belongs to the world and cannot comfort those who want to live a spiritual life. There is no wall that will not eventually be torn down. One soul is worth more than the entire world. What must we do for the soul? We must begin spiritual work. We must have only the right kind of concern. Christ will ask us what spiritual work we have accomplished, how we helped the world in spiritual matters. He will not ask what buildings we made. He will not even mention them. We will be held accountable for our spiritual progress. I want you to grasp what I am trying to say. I am not saying that one must not construct buildings, and not construct them well, but one must take care of the spiritual life first and then mind the rest, and do all that with spiritual discernment.

Simplify Your Lives

Secular people say, "How lucky are the wealthy people who live in palaces and have all kinds of conveniences!" In truth, blessed are those who have succeeded in simplifying their lives and freeing themselves from the yoke of worldly progress, of the many conveniences that have become inconveniences, and have consequently rid themselves of the dreadful anxiety that plagues so many people today. If man does not simplify his life, he will end up tormenting himself. But if he simplifies it, all his anxiety will go away.

A German man at Sinai told a very intelligent Bedouin boy, "You are intelligent, you can become literate." "And then?" the boy asked. "Well, then you will become a car mechanic." "And then?" the boy repeated. "Then you will open a car shop." "And then?" the boy asked again. "Then you will grow up and you will hire others to work for you, you will have your own staff." "In other words," the boy said, "I will pile one headache on top of the other. Isn't it better now that my mind is free of worries?" Most headaches are the result of all these thoughts we have about doing this and doing that… But if our thoughts were spiritual in nature, we would feel divine consolation and be cured of headaches.

These days I stress simplicity to lay people too, because many of the things they do are not necessary and they end up being consumed by anxiety. I speak to them of austerity and asceticism. I constantly scold them, "If you want to get rid of anxiety, simplify your lives!" That is how most divorces start. People have to do too many things, too many obligations and they get dizzy. Both

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parents work and abandon the children. The result is fatigue and nervousness, which causes small issues to turn into large quarrels and then to automatic divorces; that's where they end up. But if they simplified their lives, they would find rest and joy. Stress is catastrophic.

Once I was at a very plush house where they told me in conversation, "We live in Paradise, while other people are in such great need." "You live in hell," I replied. "God said to the rich man, *Fool, This night your soul is required of you.*[11] If Christ were to ask me, 'Where should I put you, in a house like this or in prison?' I would reply, 'In a dark prison.' Because a prison would do me good; it would remind me of Christ, the holy martyrs, the ascetics who lived in the holes of the earth, it would remind me of monastic life. The prison would resemble my cell a bit and I would be happy. But what would this palace of a house remind me of and how would that help me? That is why I find prison cells much more restful than a worldly living room. I even find it more restful than a beautiful monastic cell. I would rather spend one thousand nights in a prison cell, than one day in a plush house."

Once, when I was staying with a friend in Athens, he asked me to receive a family man who could only see me very early in the morning, at dawn, because that was the only time he had available. He arrived in a cheerful mood praising God in every other word. He was full of humility and simplicity and begged me to pray for his family. This brother, who was about thirty-eight years old, had seven children. At home, they were eleven souls, because his parents lived with him, and they all shared the same

11. Lk 12:20.

room. He spoke with great simplicity, "The room fits us all if we stand up, but if we lie down it is a bit tight. Thank God, now we are constructing a shed to use as a kitchen and we are doing fine. Father," he said "at least we have a roof over our head, while other people live in the open air."

The man was an ironer. He lived in Athens and had to leave everyday before dawn to arrive in Peiraeus in time for work in a dry-cleaning shop. He was suffering from varicose veins as a result of having to stand up all that time and his legs bothered him a lot, but his love for his family made him forget his pain and discomfort. In fact, he pitied himself constantly for not having, as he said, any love in his heart, because he did not do any acts of Christian charity and praised his wife for being charitable. Apparently, besides taking care of her children and her parents in-law, she would wash the clothes of some elderly men in the neighbourhood, tidy up their homes and even cook a little something, like soup, for them. You could see divine Grace depicted on the face of this good family man. He had Christ in his heart and was full of joy, just like his one-room house was filled with heavenly bliss. Compare this man with people who do not have Christ in their heart; they are filled with anxiety. Take two of them and try to fit them in a house large enough for eleven people; they will not find a way to fit.

Even some spiritual people will sometimes not be able to live together, no matter how much space they have available, because they don't have the fullness of Christ in their heart. If the women of *Pharasa* could see our luxuries, especially in some Monasteries, they would say, "We have abandoned God and He will send down fire

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to burn us!" I remember them performing all their chores in a matter of seconds. They had to take the goats out, first thing in the morning, and then tidy up the house. After that, they would go to the Chapels or gather in caves and those who could read would read the Life of the Saints of the day. Next they would do their prostrations and say the Jesus Prayer. And they would work and work without getting tired. Those days, a woman had to know how to mend clothes. And they would mend the clothes by hand; there were a few sewing machines in cities but no sewing machines in the villages and if I remember right, in the whole town of *Pharasa* there was one, maybe two. They used to sew their family's clothes and they were very comfortable to wear. They would also knit socks by hand. They had a caring taste (*meraki*) but they also had enough time for all these chores because they did things in a simple way. The people of *Pharasa* did not pay attention to details. They enjoyed the joy of monastic life. And if, for example, the blanket did not sit right from one side of the bed and you told them, "Straighten out the blanket," they would respond, "Why, does it prevent you from praying?"

This kind of joyful monastic life is unknown today. Most people believe that they should not go into any trouble, or be deprived of anything. But if they thought in monastic terms and lived with more simplicity, they would find the peace they are seeking. Instead, they are filled with anxiety and despair. They say, "So and so was very successful because he built two apartment buildings or because he learned five languages and so on. And I do not even own one apartment and I do not even speak one foreign language. Oh, I am good for nothing!" A person

with a car thinks, "This man has a better car; I should buy one too." So he buys the better car, but he feels no joy because someone else has an even better one. He buys the even better car but then he learns that others have their own private aeroplanes and he is unhappy again. There is no end to this. But a person who doesn't have a car rejoices when he praises God. "Thank God," he says, "even if I do not have a car, I have strong legs and I can walk. How many people are there in the world who do not have legs and cannot take care of their needs and go for walks? I at least have my legs!" And a lame person says, "There are some people who are missing both legs," and that makes him rejoice.

Ingratitude and greed cause a lot of harm. The person possessed by material things is always possessed by worries and anxiety because he trembles at the thought that he may lose both his belongings and his soul. One such wealthy man came from Athens and told me, "Father, my children will not listen to me anymore, I have lost them!" "How many children do you have," I asked him. "Two," he said. "I raised them in luxury. They had everything they wanted. I even bought them a car." In the course of the conversation, I found out that he and his wife each had their own car. "Dear man," I said, "instead of solving your problems you made them worse. Now you need a large garage to put all the cars and a mechanic to service them. You will have to pay him fourfold and moreover, all four of you are in danger of killing yourselves at any time. On the contrary, if you had simplified your life, your family would be united and you would have understanding for each other, and none of the problems you are describing. It's not your children's fault. It is your fault

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for not trying to educate them in other ways." A family does not need four cars, a garage and a mechanic and so on. Let one of you reach his destination a bit late. All these conveniences beget difficulties.

Another family man arrived at my *Kalyvi* once. He had a family of five. He told me: "Father, we have a car and we are thinking of buying another two. It would help us a lot." I said "Did you think of how difficult this is going to make your life? If you have one car you can easily park it somewhere; where are you going to put three of them? You will need a garage and an extra tank of fuel. And moreover, you will put your life in danger. It's better to have only one car and limit your outings. You will have time to see your children. You will have peace of mind. Simplifying one's life is the most important thing." "I never thought of that," he replied.

– Geronda, a man told us that twice he could not stop his car alarm. The first time it was due to a fly and the second time, he tried to get in the car the wrong way.

– People's lives are sheer misery because they do not simplify things. Most of the conveniences we have cause difficulties. Those who live in the world often suffocate from abundance. They have filled their life with gadgets and devices but this only makes it more difficult to enjoy. If we don't simplify things, one convenience will result into numerous difficulties and we will end up miserable.

When we were little, we used to cut off the spool at the end and put a wedge in it, turning it into a nice and enjoyable game for ourselves. Small kids enjoy playing with a toy car much more than their father enjoys his new Mercedes. If one asks a little girl, "What do you want a doll or an apartment building?" you will see that she

will say "a doll". But in the end, small children too get to know the vanity of the world.

– Geronda, what helps the most when one is trying to grasp the joy of austerity?

– It helps if you can grasp the deeper meaning of life *But seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.*[12] Simplicity begins from there, so does every proper approach of life.

12. Mt 6:33.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Too Many Worries Will Distance Us From God

We Must Not Create Too Many Fronts

People today do not live simply and for this reason they suffer from too many distractions. They open too many fronts of activity and lose themselves in endless solicitude. As for me, I just try to take care of one or two things, and then I start thinking about something else. I never try to do too many things at the same time. Let's say that I am thinking of doing this particular thing. Well, first I finish it, and then I start thinking about doing something else. For, if I do not finish what I have started, I cannot find peace. When someone has too many things to do at once, he loses his mind. Just thinking about all of them at once can cause someone to become schizophrenic.

Once, a young man with psychological problems came to my *Kalyvi*. He told me that he suffered from a hypersensitivity, which he inherited from his parents. I said to him, "What is this hereditary stuff you are talking about? First of all you need to get some rest. Then

you must get back to school and earn your degree. After that, go and fulfil your military service, and when you are done look for a job." He followed my advice and found his way. That is how people can come to their senses.

– Geronda, I tire easily when I work. I do not know what is to blame for it.

– What you seem to be lacking is patience. And the reason you cannot be patient is that you undertake too many things. You spread yourself too thin and you tire easily. This makes you nervous because you have *philotimo*, and when you cannot do something well, you get anxious.

When I was in the Coenobitic Monastery, there was a monk named Isidore, who served with me in the carpenter's shop. He had no patience at all. He would start working on a window, then he would get worried, and stop; next he would start on a door, he would get upset and quit; and then he started working on roofs. He would stop in the middle of something, and leave everything unfinished. He ended up losing some of the wood or cutting it the wrong size. This is how one can break his back and achieve nothing in the end.

There are some people who have limited abilities and can do only one or two things well. When they get involved in too many activities, they end up doing nothing right and drag others along too. As much as possible, one should do one or two things only, complete them correctly, and then, with a clear mind and a rested body, get started on something else. For a scattered mind will not be able to do quality spiritual work. How will he be able to remember Christ?

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Do Not Give Your Heart to Material Things

– Geronda, what do you mean when you say, "Give your legs and your hands to work but not your heart"?

– I mean that you should not give your heart to material things. Some people give their whole self to material things. They spend the entire day trying to do a job well and don't think of God at all. We should not end up there. When you work, you should use your hands and your legs, but you should not let your mind stray away from God. You should not give all your being, all your energy and your heart to material things. This way one becomes a pagan, an idol worshipper. Do your best at work, but do not give your heart to the work you do; give only your hands, your mind. Do not give your heart to hopeless, useless things. If you do, then how will your heart leap for Christ? When the heart is with Christ, then even the work we do is sanctified, our soul is at rest and there is real joy in our heart. Make the most of your heart; do not waste it.

If the heart is squandered on many insignificant things, it will not have the endurance to feel pain for the one right thing that it should care about. I will give my heart to a cancer patient, to someone who is suffering. I agonize over the young people in danger. I pray that God will enlighten them. When I have people around me, all I care for is the pain the other person feels, and the love that we must have for each other. I am not even aware of my own pain. Thus, one comes to forget his own troubles; his life now takes a new direction.

– Geronda, is it possible not to give your mind and heart to all types of work?

– When the task is simple, it helps if the mind is not absorbed. But when the task is complex, then it makes sense to become somewhat absorbed mentally but not to let that take over the heart.

– How does it take over the heart?

– How? Well, temptation comes and puts it to sleep with "morphine"! It gets hold of the heart with egotism. But when the heart surrenders to God, then the intellect rests with God while the mind concentrates on the work.[1]

– When we speak of a "carefree" mind, what do we mean exactly?

– We mean that when you work, you should not forget Christ. Do your work joyfully, but keep your mind and your heart focused on Christ. If you do this, not only you will not get tired, but you will also be able to do your spiritual work.

Work Done With Peace of Mind and Prayer Is Sanctified

– Isn't it better, Geronda, to take your time and your job slowly in order to maintain your calm?

– Yes, because when we work calmly, we maintain our serenity and then our whole day is sanctified. Unfortunately, we do not realize that when we do our work in a hurry, we become nervous. And when work is done nervously, it is not sanctified. Our goal should not be to do many things and be in constant anxiety. This is a demonic condition.

1. The Elder implies a distinction between the rational, calculating mind and the mind that together with the heart seeks and rests with God.

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When monastic handicrafts are made with peace of mind and prayer, they are sanctified and they also sanctify the people who use them. Then, it makes sense for lay people to seek these handiworks from us as a blessing. By contrast, any work made with haste and nervousness transmits this demonic condition to others. Work done with haste and anxiety is the mark of a very secular person. Instead of giving people a blessing, what these troubled souls impart on others with their handiwork is their troubled state. A person's state affects not only the work that he does, but also the materials, the wood that he is using! The final product of a man's work reflects his spiritual state. If he is upset and angry and swears, his work will not bring a blessing to others. But if he chants, if he says the Jesus Prayer, his work is sanctified. The first condition is demonic, the other is divine.

If you act with piety and pray while you are working, you are always sanctified and everything around you becomes sanctified. When one has God in mind, his works and his handicrafts are also sanctified. Let us say, for example, that I am making a box while saying the Jesus Prayer; I am praying and at the same time working for the glory of God. My goal is not to make boxes, and to do it quickly, to produce a lot of them and end up full of anxiety. That would be a demonic state. We did not come to the Monastery for this. We came to be sanctified and to sanctify whatever we do. This is the reason why sometimes you feel like a good employee performing your assigned tasks; you get so busy running around, doing your job that you forget to take Christ with you. But if you begin your work with the Jesus Prayer, you will feel like a servant of Christ. So, if you want to be sanctified and to sanctify

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your work, make sure that you make the Jesus Prayer a part of everything you do. Do you know how abundantly God will bless you then, and how many good things and blessings He will send your way?

– Geronda, when the task is mental, such as a translation, how can you possibly say the Jesus Prayer to sanctify the work you are doing?

– When the task requires mental concentration, your work will be sanctified when your mind is focused on God. Then you will be living in the atmosphere of God, even if you are not able to say the Prayer. When one reaches a spiritual state, he is greatly helped by this. He does not attempt to understand the meanings of words based on reason alone, but gets to know them by divine illumination.

– And what happens when I must undertake this type of work, but have not yet reached such a spiritual state?

– In that case, you must still go ahead and do the work, but you need to pray and ask God to enlighten you. You must do your best to find help in these divine meanings (what divine illumination allows) and to work with piety. Make sure that you take a short break every one or two hours and say the Jesus Prayer.

– Geronda, especially in translation work, one has many distractions. We must consult dictionaries, read commentaries...

– As I have already said in the past, what helps in translation work is to live on a daily basis with purified thoughts that make a person a receptacle of Grace. Then divine interpretation will come from divine illumination and not from the mind, the dictionary, or the pen. What I am trying to say is that we must rely on the divine rather than the human (on what comes first, not on what comes second).

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Too Many Worries Make People Forget God

– Geronda, does worrying about too many things take us away from God?

– Look, let me try to explain. When a little child is playing and is all absorbed with his toys, he is not aware that his father may be next to him caressing him. If he interrupts his play a bit, then he will become aware of his father's caresses. Similarly, when we are preoccupied with too many activities and are anxiously concerned about them, when we worry too much about worldly matters, we cannot become aware of God's love. God gives but we do not sense it. Be careful not to waste your precious energy on redundant worries and vanities, which will turn to dust one day. When you do this, you not only tire your body, but you also scatter your mind aimlessly, offering God only your fatigue and yawns at the time of prayer – much like the sacrifice offered by Cain. It follows that your inner state will be like that of Cain's, you will be full of anxiety and sighs provoked by the devil standing by your side.

We must not waste aimlessly the fruit, the inner core of our power and then leave the shells for God. The many cares of life sap the marrow of our heart and leave nothing for Christ. If you notice that your mind constantly wanders off to various chores that you have to do, you must realize that you are not doing well spiritually, and this should alarm you because you have distanced yourself from God. You must realize that you are closer to material things than you are to God, closer to creation than to the Creator.

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Many times, unfortunately, even a monk will be deceived, and draw a worldly form of pleasure from his work. It is in man's nature to do good because his Creator is good. But the monk is striving to transform himself from a human being into an angelic being. This is why when it comes to material things, his work must be limited to the bare necessities, so that he will have time for spiritual work. Then, the joy that he feels will come from the fruit of his spiritual labour; it will be a spiritual joy, abundant nourishment for himself and for everybody else.

Those who work too hard and are full of worries forget God. Father Tychon[2] used to say, "The Pharaoh gave the Israelites too much work and just enough food to forget God." In our days, the devil has made people lose themselves in matter and all kinds of distractions; they work too much and they eat too much. This way they come to forget God,[3] and they lose the ability or rather the will, to make good use of the freedom given to them, and sanctify their soul. Fortunately, however, and against the devil's desires, there is a good side to this; people are so busy that they don't have enough time to sin as much they would have liked to.

Too Much Work and Worry Is the Mark of a Secular Monk

It is advisable for people who wish to live spiritually, especially monastics, to avoid certain pursuits, which

2. See Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, *Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters*, Souroti, Thessaloniki, 1993, p. 44.
3. Cf. Ex. 1:13-14.

obstruct them from their spiritual goal. They should not get involved in endless tasks, for there is never an end to work. If monks or nuns do not learn to do the internal, spiritual work, they will seek to escape in external activities. People who attempt to complete endless tasks will end their lives with all kinds of spiritual imperfections and while, when they reach the end of their road, they will repent for having done so, it will be too late because their "passport" will have already been issued. After all, it's necessary to take time off from work, even for a short while.

When we reduce the number of our chores, there will come, naturally, a bodily rest and a thirst for inner spiritual work, which comforts and never tires us. Then the soul will breathe an abundance of spiritual oxygen. Fatigue from spiritual work does not make us tired; instead, it rests and refreshes us, because it lifts us and brings us closer to our Loving Father, where our soul rejoices.

When physical fatigue lacks a spiritual sense, or rather, when it is not the result of a spiritual need and therefore justified, it rouses anger in man and makes him rough. Even the most tamed and good tempered horse, when over-worked, will start kicking and developing a bad temper, despite the fact that normally they are supposed to become more gentle with age.

There are some things that can always be left out, so that spiritual matters may take precedence. Too much work and too many worries will make a monk secular, and give him a secular sensibility. His life will then be full of stress and secular anxiety and he will experience in this life a portion of hell, endless cares, worries and disasters. But when the monk has no concern for material things and is instead mindful only of his salvation and the salvation

of all human beings, then he has God as his Steward and men as his helpers.

Do you remember the incident with Father Gerondios[4] and his spiritual son? Father Gerondios had asked the *Panaghia* to provide some water for him and his disciple to drink, and the *Panaghia*, like the good Mother that She is, opened a crack in the rock wall of the *asketerio*[5] from which holy water gushed out for them to drink. Later, the young monk began gathering stones and soil near the spring and building terraced gardens. He became so busy with construction, that he neglected his spiritual duties. But the water was not enough for all these works, and so he took a chisel and widened the crack so that more water would come out. The *Panaghia* then dried out that spring and caused the water to flow at a point much lower from the *asketerio*, as if She were telling him, "If you want gardens and distractions so badly, go and carry the water from afar."

Distractions and Spiritual Parasites Go Hand in Hand

– Geronda, weren't you upset when, after having laboured hard to set up one *Kelli*, you would leave it and go elsewhere?

– I would not have left without serious reason.

– And everywhere you went you did only the necessary things?

4. See Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain, *Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters*, p. 156-157.

5. The dwelling of an ascetic.

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– Yes, I did only the necessary things for down here, so that I would have time to do the necessary things for up there, for Heaven. If you lose yourself in earthly pursuits, you will also lose your way to Heaven. You do one thing, and then you want to do yet another and another. And if you get stuck in this gear, you've lost your way! Lose yourself in the world and you will lose Heaven. As our heavenly pursuits are endless, so too are the affairs of life here on earth. You have a choice: either you get lost on earth or you get "lost" in Heaven. Can you imagine what it means to lose yourself in heavenly pursuits? Oh, how I would be absorbed by the Jesus Prayer! Has that ever happened to you?

When we work too hard and in a hurry, the result is fatigue and distraction, and neither will help us in the spiritual life. For they displace our vigilance and agitate our soul. Under such conditions, one is not only incapable of praying, but he cannot even think. He cannot act with prudence and therefore his actions are not right.

So be careful not to waste your time aimlessly, leaving no time for your spiritual life, because you will reach a point of being so agitated inside that you will no longer be able to do your spiritual chores. Instead, you will try to get involved with some work, or start a conversation, or even look to create a problem to keep you busy. When we neglect the Jesus Prayer and our spiritual duties, the enemy gets hold of our spiritual "heights" and he begins his assault from up there, using both our flesh and our mind as his weapon. Thus, he renders useless our physical and spiritual strengths, and by cutting off our communication with God, he leads our soul to be taken prisoner by the passions.

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Father Tychon used to tell monks that they should live ascetically to free themselves from worldly cares, and not to work like labourers and eat like men living in the world. For the monk's labour is prostrations, fasting and prayers, not only for himself, but for all people, both living and dead; and then, he must also do some physical labour for the necessary things of this life, to avoid becoming a burden on others.

– Geronda, are distractions always an obstacle to the spiritual life?

– If you are preoccupied only with what is required by monastic obedience, even if you have some distractions here and there, you will not suffer any harm. If your concern for the service assigned to you in the Monastery, or for the help you provide to a Sister, does not exceed the appropriate limits, then your only desire will be for the Jesus Prayer and your help to others will be positive. But if you go beyond these limits and start adding distractions and spend your time on worthless things, then your mind will scatter and depart from God. How can one experience the joy of God when his mind is not focused on Him? It's easy for the heart to grow cold. When, for instance, I happen to have visitors, even though my work is still spiritual, at the end of the day, I feel that my heart is not the same as when I have prayed all day long. The mind is filled with all sorts of things and it's so difficult to remove them. Whenever you can, throughout the day, try to say the Jesus Prayer mentally and also to chant in a low voice.

A little spiritual reading, especially before prayer, is very helpful. It warms the soul and dispels the distractions of the day. And then, when the soul is freed and taken to

the divine realm of the spirit, the mind moves without distractions. When we read a chapter from the Gospels or a passage from the *Gerontikon*, which is short but powerful, the mind is transported to the spiritual realm and stays there. You see, the mind is like a lively child, running about in constant play. But when you entice it with something sweet, it does not leave anymore.

Where distractions and worries are removed, inner peace and spiritual success will follow. Too many worries will distance people from God. Distractions go hand in hand with spiritual parasites and the static can get so bad that spiritual wireless radios will not give a clear signal. A monk who does not lead a spiritual life has no excuse. Look at the poor people who live in the world and still try to lead spiritual lives. The monk has none of their worries; neither rent, nor debts nor keeping a job is on his mind. And he has his Spiritual Father close by, ready and available; the Church is right in the Monastery. Prayer Services, Holy Unction, Supplication Services, and Divine Liturgies – it's all there for him. A monk enjoys a carefree life and his only concern is how to live an angelic life; he has no other goal. By contrast, a layperson has so much to care about! He must nurture and raise his children and, at the same time, he has to struggle for the salvation of his soul. Elder Tryfon[6] used to say, "Does the monk want to attend a vigil? He can do it. Does he want to fast? He can do it. He has no wife and children. The layman, however, cannot. He has children

6. See Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain, *Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters*, p. 117.

… one is asking for a pair of shoes, the other needs new clothes, the other needs something else…"

We Must Learn to Care About Things in the Right Way

If we seek above all the Kingdom of Heaven and that's all we care for, the rest will be given to us.[7] If we become forgetful, then not only do we waste our time but we waste our very own self. When we remain mindful and prepare for the next life, then this life too will become meaningful. When we start thinking of the next life, nothing is the same anymore. But if all we think about is how to make this a comfortable life, then not only are we miserable, but we end up weary and condemned.

Do not be overwhelmed with anxiety and be possessed by the thought that, "Now we must do this, next we must do that and so on," because this way Armageddon[8] will come, and you will still be hard at work. Even doing things with anxiety is demonic. Tune in to Christ! Otherwise, you will appear to be living near Him but inside you will still carry the mindset of this world, and, you might end up, I am afraid, like the *foolish virgins*.[9]

The wise virgins did not only have kindness, they also had the right kind of mindfulness; unlike the foolish virgins that were careless, they were on guard and vigilant. This is why the Lord gave them the solemn warning, *Be awake and watchful*.[10] They were virgins but foolish.

7. Cf. Mt 6:33; Lk 12:13.
8. Rev 16:16.
9. Cf. Mt 25:1-13.
10. Mt 25:13.

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If someone is born a fool, it is a blessing from God. She enters directly into the next life without having to pass any examinations. But if she is gifted with an intelligent mind and yet lives a foolish life, she will have no excuse on the Day of Judgment.

Can you see in the case of Martha and Mary, mentioned in the Gospel,[11] how mindless care for things caused Martha to behave somewhat impudently? It seems that in the beginning Mary was actually helping her, but when she realized that Martha was nowhere near completing her preparations, she left her and went to listen to Jesus. She thought to herself, "Am I to lose time with my Christ for the sake of Martha's salads and sweets?" As if Christ had come to their home to taste Martha's salads and foods! It was then that Martha became annoyed and said, *Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone*?[12]

Let us be careful, then, not to behave like Martha. Let us pray that we will become good "Marys".

11. Cf. Lk 10:38-42.
12. Lk 10:40.

His message

First we believe in God and then we love God and His image, the man. Faith increases with prayers. "Add us faith".

"As i have realised all evil comes from unfaithfulness. When someone doesn't believe in God he wants to have fun. So he falls into every kind of sin".

"People must understand the deepest meaning of life that is, that this life is given to prepare us for the future life. The people must find a guide, a religius guide, as the ones who need a guide when they travels. Then with the help of the religius guide people will programme their life, with a little study, a little prayer and avoiding the causes of sin and the wordly thinking which is the worst of all. So their heart will be devoted to Christ".

"We must wrestle with mettle to save ourselves and not to pain Christ. Christ will tell us "My child i have done so many things to save you. I have shed my blood and i have gone through passion, what have you done to save yourself?"

"Each person must find his inclination. The hard-working person, either in married life or in monastic, will be successful".

"We should prefer sadness and accept it more than we accept happiness. The bitter medicine is usually better than the sweet because it cures. Real happiness springs from pain".

"What prevents people from succeding in his spiritual life is the fact that he uses his brain not to improve his spiritual life but to do other things".

"We must feel the pain for our present state to be able to pray with all our heart".

"Now it is the time to seperate the kids from the lambs, the faithful fom the unfaithful. Later there will be time when we take examinations and

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suffer persecation for our faith and copper will be separated from gold".

"When somebody is troubled because he suffers for other, cares for other, makes their problems his own problems then he will get the pay of a martyr. How lovely are the people who sacrifice everything! They don't have any problems and their face shines because they are filled with God's joy".

"The basis of our spiritual life is to think of the others first and then of ourselves. When we get into the others place and understand them then we are related to Christ".

"God's grace is an expensive thing. It must find the person who spiritually agrees with God to come and stay in his heart. And of course the person must work hard to get it, while we want God's grace to come and release us from weaknesses without struggling for it".

"It takes lots of sacrifice, self denial, modesty mettle to make the Holy Ghost come and stay in people's hearts. Spiritual life isn't enjoyment. Christ has put the plug but our wires are rusty and they don't get God's grace. We should remove the rust from our wires, struggle to know ourselves, stop passions and get the virtues to make God's grace visit us".

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